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SUBJECT: MESHAAL WARMS TO OBAMA, SYRIA CONTAINS MESSAGE

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Meshaal spoke on June 25 from Damascus, welcoming President Obama's "change in rhetoric" toward the Arab world and Palestine. He encouraged the Obama administration to follow through, saying he was not "bewitched by speeches." He also criticized the "Zionist influence" over the West, and called Israeli PM Netanyahu's conditions for a Palestinian state unacceptable. Although Meshaal gave the speech in Damascus, it did not run on Syrian state television. According to reliable sources, Meshaal delayed his speech at SARG's request as a courtesy to visiting Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who was in Damascus on June 20. End summary.

12. (C) After waiting nearly a week to respond to Israeli PM Netanyahu's June 14 speech, Khalid Meshaal delivered a speech in Damascus on June 25 in which he warmed to President Obama's recent words in Cairo but called for more action to back them up. "We value Obama's new rhetoric toward Hamas for it is a first step in the right direction leading to direct dialogue without preconditions, and we welcome this," he said. Meshaal congratulated resistance efforts in "Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan" for their "perseverance" that brought about this transformation.

13. (U) Without directly criticizing the United States, Meshaal was skeptical that President Obama would follow through. He criticized the "Zionist influence on U.S. decision-making" and said that he was still "assessing the Obama administration" and would not be "bewitched by speeches."

14. (U) In response to Netanyahu's speech, Meshaal outlined the arguments for a Palestinian state and rejected Israel as a Jewish state. Meshaal also took aim at PM Netanyahu's conditions for a future Palestine, claiming a defenseless country divided by expanding Israeli settlements would represent a "freak" state (mesikh) that no one could accept. At the same time, Meshaal also called for stronger words from the U.S. President, asking him to "realize the roots of the struggle and acknowledge the Israeli crimes against our people." Meshaal's tone was hopeful, however, and talked about change in the Obama administration in "whens," not "ifs."

15. (U) Meshaal's speech appeared on Al-Aqsa satellite TV, the Hamas-run network. Commentary appeared on the independent Al-Jazeera satellite TV network. Syria, however, did not air the speech on state-run television.

16. (C) Comment: Syrian officials are claiming credit for

delaying Meshaal's speech as a sign of their efforts to moderate Hamas's posture. We have heard from several reliable sources that Meshaal was planning to make the speech during Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's June 20 visit to Damasus, but the SARG convinced Meshaal to delay it as a courtesy to Abbas. It is telling that Meshaal's speech ran on regional cable TV but was not transmitted locally to Syrian audiences; this decision may suggest a subtle Syrian effort to create some distance between the SARG and Hamas's position. It is also worth noting that, unlike many of his recent statements, Meshaal refrained from directly criticizing Abbas or the Palestinian Authority.

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